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AUTHOR Stowell, Jessica
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ABSTRACT

Higher education faculty can be more effective by recognizing what causes immediacy and approach-avoidance behavior in their surroundings, what nonverbal signals they are sending, and how to control their environment, thereby enhancing their interaction with students. This paper examines immediacy theory, approach-avoidance theory, color theory, light theory, and the Asian art of placement, viewing how they explain behavior, especially in college and university environments. (Contains 15 references.) (Author/RS)

FACULTY CAN ADJUST COMMUNICATION ENVIRONMENTS TO IMPROVE INTERACTION WITH STUDENTS: THE THEORIES THAT DRIVE THE ENVIRONMENT

BY

JESSICA STOWELL

TULSA JUNIOR COLLEGE
10300 E. 81ST.
TULSA OK 74133-4513

(918) 631-7650

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Abstract

Higher Education faculty can be more effective by recognizing what causes immediacy and approach-avoidance behavior in their surroundings, what nonverbal signals they are sending, and how to control their environment, thereby enhancing their interaction with students. This paper will examine immediacy theory, approach-avoidance theory, color theory, light theory, and the Asian art of placement, viewing how they explain behavior, especially in college and university environments.

"The environment in which people communicate frequently contributes to the overall outcomes of their encounters" (Knapp, 1978). Environment influences our behavior and we can alter environments in order to elicit certain types of responses. As our knowledge of the environment increases, people may use it to help obtain desired responses. This is the oint of the book by B.F. Skinner, Beyond Freedom and Dignity. Skinner's operant behaviorism sheds light on Mehrabian's immediacy theory and thus approach/avoidance which explains how people are influenced by their environments and how manipulation of the environment can modify the interactions of people in interpersonal communication. Higher Education faculty can be more effective by recognizing what causes immediacy and approach-avoidance behavior in their surroundings, what nonverbal signals they are sending, and how to control their environment, thereby enhancing their interaction with students.

This paper will examine immediacy theory, approach/avoidance theory, and color and light theory, and the Asian notion of placement, Feng Shui, viewing how they explain behavior, especially in school environments. Because we are influenced by our environments which have an effect on immediacy, the nature of architectural arrangement can affect the nature of behavior therein, causing approach avoidance behavior, and emotional reactions.

Morris (1977) would say that faculty are functioning

in a modern pseudo-tribe, using classroom and office space as home base, in a larger sub-group of a tribal territory. A union, political party, fraternity, or indeed a department of a college or university serves the needs of the individual to belong, to have a sense of tribal allegiance or brotherhood. Typical of these sub-groups is the development of territorial signals: headquarters, diplomas, or displays of books for instance.

We wish to concentrate on the architectural design and movable objects (territorial signals) in the territorial environment, which also encompass color, sound, lighting, and general visual-esthetic appeal. We will examine each facet in turn bringing in examples and theory.

IMMEDIACY

Mehrabian's Immediacy theory states that "People are drawn toward persons and things they like, evaluate highly, and prefer; and they avoid or move away from things they dislike, evaluate negatively, or don't prefer" (Mehrabian in Friedl). The Immediacy principle can be manifested in two types of communication: nonverbal and verbal. Immediacy in nonverbal behavior is expressed in such ways as mutual eye gaze, leaning toward someone, or attentive observation. And immediacy can be influenced by our environment. An article of furniture, such as a desk placed between two interactants can decrease immediacy, (Friedl, 1989) because it places distance between the two parties and creates a physical barrier. Studies on teacher immediacy define it as nonverbal behaviors that reduce physical and/or psychological distance between the teachers and students. Close placement of chairs in a faculty office would reduce physical distance, and strong eye contact and nodding or smiling would reduce psychological distance.

A psychologist, Robert Sommer, was charged with finding out as much as he could about the relationship of furniture to conversations in a hospital. Sommer's study involved observing conversations at rectangular tables in the hospital cafeteria. He observed that situations with people at right angles to each other produced six times as many conversations as face-to-face situations across the thirty-six inch table, and twice as many as in a side-by-side seating arrangement (Hall, 1966).

Sommer's study is indicative that individuals tend to sit opposite one another in competitive situations and adjacent to one another in cooperative and affiliative situations. If this is so, then the typical classroom arrangement of desks in military rows, all facing front,

create little or no immediacy among the students, and in fact, could create an adversarial role between the teacher and the students.

Furthermore, a person's choice of desk placement would seem to be especially important in creating a sociopetal space (furniture arrangement that allows people to face one another or sit at angles). If sociopetal architectural features promote human interaction while sociofugal (furniture arrangement which lines people up all facing the same direction, such as in a typical classroom) spaces promote alienation, then it is reasonable to assume that the architectural nature of the classroom and the faculty office may serve to enhance or diminish the student's sense of immediacy with the professor, and in turn, the nature of the faculty-student interaction (Zweigenhaft, 1976).

Zweigenhaft (1976) studied furniture arrangement in faculty offices in order to examine the relation of desk placement with certain characteristics of the instructor and the nature of his interactions with students. It was predicted and found that those faculty who placed their desks between themselves and their students, using the desk as a physical barrier, were more distant from students in other ways, including age, status, and the way they were perceived by their students. Those faculty members were regularly rated less positively on the student evaluation items that concerned the nature of the student-faculty interaction, and in general, were rated less positively as teachers by their students. Therefore a professor who places a desk between himself and his student is perceived by the student as less immediate. The student has little or no chance to draw near psychologically, or physically to the faculty member. Sommer's (1969) conclusion that "teachers are hindered by their insensitivity to and fatalistic acceptance of the classroom environment" is not off target.

In observation at a large southern junior college, it was found that the offices without the desk barrier between the student and instructor are frequently visited by students. Three of the English instructors not only have no desk barrier, as the desks are against the wall, but keep the large sliding glass "patio" doors to the hall wide open when they are in the offices. Invariably there are students hovering around those instructors. Even though the large glass doors do not appear to be a barrier, decreasing immediacy, they may serve as such since students frequently knock on them as if they were opaque, even when they can see that the instructor is in residence and alone.

A striking phenomenon observed in the science building

at the same junior college was a classic example of low to no immediacy. There is a hallway with four science faculty offices; upon inspection the offices could not be viewed because the draperies on the glass doors were closed in three of the four offices and three quarters closed in the fourth office (it is usual in the rest of the college to leave the draperies open unless involved in a very private conference or lunch). There were no faculty name plates on the doors, which is irregular. The only door decor was test results and a computer generated line graph. In the Liberal Arts division, it is common practice to plaster the glass door with cartoons, notices, and posters germane to the discipline. Revisitation to the same science hall revealed the same situation on each occasion. This arrangement indicated very low immediacy. The scientists did not seem as student oriented as the open doored, non-barrier, cartoon embellished, English faculty.

If we think the students are unaware or uncaring about immediacy of the faculty, we misjudge them. There was an article in the student newspaper about how to choose an instructor based on the person's office and what was displayed on the door. The student author, Rick Russell wrote in part:

> While teachers may simply want their little cubicle to be different from the next little cubicle, these territorial markings can reveal a lot about the beasts that dwell behind the sliding doors.
>
> Probably the most common window dressings are cartoons. This is fortunate because a great deal can be learned by analyzing the things that make an instructor laugh. For example, if most of the clippings on a door involve scenes of one large character dismembering hoards of smaller characters, chances are this instructor has a pretty aggressive teaching style.

These "artifactual codes" (cartoons) serve a utilitarian function, by giving the students a clue to the instructors' teaching style, but are also statements about the individual's status, or taste, or role in society. Frequently these artifacts play an important role in structuring and maintaining communication systems. These nonverbal symbols operate at low levels of awareness, yet they are important (Harrison & Crouch, 1975) for they create immediacy.

Having investigated Mehrabian's Immediacy theory, let us turn to Environmental Psychology for Approach-Avoidance theory and see it operating in school settings.

APPROACH-AVOIDANCE

A generalization about approach or avoidance is that approach behavior, or an environment that causes approach, is usually a positive or desired situation having to do with movement toward, exploration, friendliness, improved performance. And avoidance behavior or an avoidance-causing environment is generally negative, having to do with movement away from, withdrawal, interpersonal coldness, defective performance (Mehrabian, 1976).

The most controversial of Mehrabian's (1976) assumptions has to do with human behavior. He assumes that people's feelings or emotions are what ultimately determine what they do and how they do it. He also assumes that environments can cause in people feelings of anger, fear, boredom, or pleasure, and do so regardless of how people think they should feel in such environments; and furthermore, that these feelings will cause people to behave in certain ways, regardless of how they think they should behave. We can refrain from overt aggression if we are angered; but we cannot will our anger to go away, and we cannot entirely mask the physiological and behavioral symptoms of anger. "So a person who is masking his anger or even denying to himself that he is angry will not behave in ways that are consistent with feelings of pleasure and relaxation" (Mehrabian, 1976). A particular environment causes certain emotional reactions in a person. And these reactions in turn cause the person to approach or avoid the environment to a greater or lesser degree.

ASIAN ART OF PLACEMENT

Rather than employing approach/avoidance theory the Asians use Feng Shui, the art of placement. A household word in Asia, Feng Shui is a cross between an art and a science. Its goal is to arrange buildings, rooms, and furniture in the most beneficial way to achieve maximum harmony with nature (Rossbach, p. 2). To many Chinese, feng shui is essential in the art of business management. Now that Western corporations are incorporating power strategies from the East, feng shui offers another financial edge over competitors. The main goal of Feng Shui is for chi, or energy to flow through the room, building, or person smoothly. Any blocks to the chi can create problems for the person in a variety of areas. Chi is the breath essential to maintaining physical, environmental, and emotional balance. The point of feng shui is to harness and enhance environmental chi to improve the flow of chi within our bodies, thus improving our life and destiny.

Two of the precepts of Feng Shui most relevant to offices and classrooms are angles and desk placement. Angles are to be avoided because they direct too much energy in a negative fashion at whatever they point to. The Bank of China building in Hong Kong, designed by I.M. Pei is said to have disrupted the Chi in the area because of the numerous angles and sharp corners. If a person must negotiate sharp angles while moving from place to place, the energy or chi is disruputed. Compare the feeling of walking through a corridor which zig zags sharply, with the feeling of wandering along a curving path in the woods. The energy flows more smoothly along the curves.

The second precept of feng shui is that of desk placement. In order to keep the worker from being surprised by visitors, the desk should face the door; if possible the desk should be at an angle facing the door. The position "avoids the likelihood of being startled at one's work - an experience that unbalances chi and impairs work by making one jumpy, easy to upset, and partially distracted" (Rossbach, p. 115).

COLOR

We should discuss color in the environment, because color concepts are cultural artifacts (Steinhart, 1985). Psychologists have observed that certain colors have a decided influence on people (Kanner, 1989). An interior designer will tell you that warm colors, red, yellow, orange, create activity. That is why so many warm colors are used in fast food restaurants; the idea is to move people quickly in and out, and make room for more. Cool colors, green and blue have a soothing effect and are good for bedrooms and study rooms.

Why ? Robert Gerard (in Sharpe, 1974) showed that "red had a more rousing effect on the functions of the autonomic nervous system and on visual cortical activity than did blue". Birren (1980) states that there is in color and light a centrifugal action (away from the organism to its environment). With high illumination, and warm colors in the environment the body tends to direct its attention outward. There is increased activity, and alertness. Such an environment is conducive to physical activity, and cheerful spirit. It is a good setting for factories, schools, homes where manual tasks are performed. On the other hand, color and light may have a centripetal action (away from the environment and toward the organism). With softer surroundings, cool colors and lower brightness, there is less distraction and a person is able to concentrate on visual and mental tasks. This is an

appropriate setting for sedentary activities requiring use of the eyes and/or brain, offices, and study rooms. Therefore, color should be taken into account in the overall environment as a factor which facilitates approach or avoidance behavior.

Recognizing that certain colors are more psychologically stimulating, or soothing, and contribute to the overall environment in a profound way, colors should be taken into account when planning any environment, and used as a tool to accomplish whatever function is deemed appropriate for that environment. If a person wishes to whip through a lot of paperwork at his desk, but not do any deep contemplation, an accent wall of burgundy red would facilitate the task. If another person hopes to be able to counsel students in a quiet and relaxing atmosphere, soft blue or green walls are most appropriate because they create a calm environment.

LIGHT

As light affects color, it affects students even in the seeming absence of color. Canadian psychologist Warren Hathaway reports that academic achievement and physical development may both be dramatically affected by the type of lighting used in schoolrooms. Hathaway concluded that full-spectrum lighting fosters swifter learning, better health and stronger growth than two other commonly used types of light (Hathaway, 1993). Other investigators find the same results. They theorize that the ultraviolet light in full spectrum is beneficial for health, producing Vitamin D in the skin. Shortages of the ultraviolet light have long been implicated in "winter depression" prevalent in northern latitudes.

Can we not generalize these findings to the surroundings we live and work in each day? As a faculty member, should one ask why student visitors are standing when they come to the office, rather than sitting down, or are staying much longer than seems necessary, or why they seem more strained, or relaxed, than they do in the classroom? Our office environments have an effect not only on us, but on our visitors. Some offices increase immediacy, others decrease it. Some offices cause approach, both physical and psychological, while others cause avoidance.

> Every interior betrays the nonverbal skills of its inhabitants. The choice of materials, the distribution of space, the kind of objects that command attention or demand to be touched -compared to

> those that intimidate or repel -have much to say about the preferred sensory modalities of their owners (Ruesch & Kees, 1956, in Knapp).

The theories we have explored, immediacy theory, approach-avoidance, and color theory explain how the environment can have an impact on an interpersonal relationship. Knowing how to apply the theory is to control the relationship. However, Mehrabian cautions that the system does not indicate a passive or purely reactive role for human beings.

> Environmental psychologists work with the converse assumption. Human beings have a Promethean gift amounting to genius for deliberately altering their environments, and to deny or minimize this gift is to be ignorant. But this human genius can be more or less informed, more or less disciplined, more or less effective in achieving its goals. And this is what environmental psychology is all about: giving people informed, disciplined and effective means of coping with what surrounds them (Mehrabian, 1976).

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